

MARIA-KATHARINA LANG

The Tears of the Camel: Reflections on Depictions and Descriptions of the Camel in Mongolian Culture

In 2004 the film *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (m. *Ingen nulims*¹) was nominated for an Oscar in the “Best Documentary” category. The narrative documentary was written and directed by the German-trained Mongolian director Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni. Its protagonists are the members of an extended family of herders in the Gobi desert area, who own a herd of sixty camels. The docu-drama, combining unstaged sequences with recreations following the storyline of a prepared script, had a wide public appeal. In the view of social anthropology and Mongolian studies, the storyline has several elements worth analyzing, as they reflect cultural practices such as animal herding, human and animal interaction, music, Mongolian symbolism, natural and human landscapes. The film tells the following story:

During spring a family of herders in the Gobi desert assists the births of their camel herd. The last calf to be born turns out to be a rare and thus particularly valued white colt. The mother rejects the new born, refusing to suckle it and failing to establish a natural bond. With the help of various rites the family tries to restore the harmony between mother and calf. They call upon the services of a group of Buddhist monks (*lama*) who perform a ritual, offering of dough effigies (m. *dorom*; tib. *torma*)² and playing monastic musical instruments at an *owoo*, a sacred stone cairn (see picture 20).

This ritual does not improve the situation. The family then manage to engage a musician who plays a horsehead fiddle, the *morin khuur*. First he hangs the instrument on the first hump of the mother camel to establish a linkage between the mother and the instrument. Then he removes the instrument and starts playing, accompanied by a female family member singing a soothing melody without words but repeatedly intoning the letters “*khoos, khoos, khoos*”. After a while the mother camel starts to weep, tears running down her face, and she reconciles with her baby, allowing it to suckle, and thus the rare white camel calf is saved.

Several important Mongolian cultural markers are included in this film narrative: a white camel, Mongolian belief systems such as Buddhism and pre-Buddhist rites, and the traditional Mongolian instrument par excellence, the *morin khuur*, the horsehead fiddle. These are manifestations of Mongolian cultural and social identity and construction of identity in the context of historic and political events. In the following I will look at these markers, focusing on the relation to the camel in Mongolian art and historic descriptions. I will reflect on the background of the story, its symbolism and among other things draw a connection to the Austrian history of science. As one of the five domestic animals (sheep, goats, cattle, horses and camels) the camel holds an important place in Mongolian society. This is expressed in various ways: Camels played a role in the expansion of the Mongolian Empire, they served as a gift within the tribute system between Mongols and the rulers of the Ming and Qing Dynasties in China, music is performed especially for camels and they serve as riding animals – not only for people, as I will

¹ There is no widely shared well-established system of transcribing Mongolian. In this article I follow the transcription used by Christopher Atwood in the Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire (Atwood 2004). The following abbreviations are used in the text: m. – Mongolian, skr. – Sanskrit, tib. – Tibetan.

² Torma are figures made mostly of a mixture of flour and butter. They have specific, often conical shapes and may be colored. Various forms are used as offerings in Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism and in tantric rituals. It is believed that making and offering torma might i. a. appease spirits and remove obstacles.

show. Descriptions and depictions of camels (like some presented in this article) may contribute to the understanding of the significance of this animal in Mongolian society, history and culture.

THE CAMEL IN MONGOLIA

The lives of the Mongolian herders and their traditional economy rely on the horse, cattle, sheep, goats and the camel, the “five animals or snouts” (m. *tavan khoshuu mal*). The horse provides mobility and *airag*, the fermented mare’s milk, which has been the traditional national beverage of Mongolia from ancient times until today. The sheep, goats, and cattle are the sources for food and wool, as well as providing fuel and shelter. The two-humped Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*) is used as draft animal, providing transport, fuel, fine hair, milk and meat. The Bactrian camel is better adapted to the cold, harsh climate than the dromedary. In Mongolia the Bactrian primarily live in the Gobi areas; the endangered wild camel (m. *khawtgai*) is found in the south-west.³

Early traces of the domestic and wild camel in Mongolian art are depictions on petroglyphs from the Upper Paleolithic to the Bronze and early Iron Ages and bronze figures in the animal style tradition. Petroglyphs and literary evidence depict and describe the camel drawing the then common yurt carts (a yurt, m. *ger*,⁴ is a round Mongolian felt tent). One rock engraving from Chuluut in northern Mongolia depicts a white camel. (Nowgorodowa 1980:49,179, 1989:21, Atwood 2004:75, Mongolian Art 2008:18).

WHITE CAMELS

The camel calf in the film *The Story of the Weeping Camel* referred to at the beginning is white. For the Mongols, white as an auspicious color has always been of a special significance: the Mongolian New Year is called *tsagaan sar* (white month), during the New Year’s celebration people eat *tsagaan idee* (white foods), white felt was used in context of marriage and burial ceremonies and so forth.

Camels are mentioned in various parts of the *Secret History of the Mongols*, the oldest known Mongolian chronicle:⁵ It says that during the last phase of Chinggis Khan’s life (around 1162 to 1227), when he was planning to conquer the Tangut people in north-west China,⁶ camels were used as pack animals and with their help the Tanguts were finally defeated. One might say, Chinggis Khan and his troops used the camel to make their way to conquer China, a long desired aim. After the defeat, the Tangut king Iluqu Burqan paid homage to the Mongols in form of presents such as gold and silver vessels and nine horses and nine camels – probably white ones (Rachewiltz 2006, Taube 2005). White camels were regarded as most honored animals in Central Asia in general and enjoyed special appreciation (see picture 21). There is considerable evidence for the high esteem of the camel in the period of the Mongolian Empire (1206 to 1260) and its successor states. Marco Polo describes the New Year festivities at the court of Chinggis Khans grandson Khubilai Khan (1215 to 1294), founder of the Yuan Dynasty. According to Polo the New Year celebrations were called “White Celebration” – in Mongolian until today *tsagaan sar* (white month).

³ For a more detailed discussion about the Mongolian wild camels see the article by Adiya Yadamsuren and Enkhbileg Dulamtseren in this volume.

⁴ In the Mongolian the felt tent – still used by most of rural dwellers in Mongolia and in the “ger-districts” in the capital Ulaanbaatar – is called *ger* (home). This mobile form of a residence is constructed of a collapsible wooden frame covered by a layer of felt and a layer of white cloth.

⁵ *The Secret History of the Mongols*, was probably written in 1252. It is written in epic form more like an “insider” account about the life of Chinggis Khan, his companions and his family, the Borjigid (Atwood 2004).

⁶ The Xia (Tangut) dynasty ruled north-west China from 1038 to 1227, until its final destruction by Chinggis Khan. The dynasty was founded by the Mi-nyag people, originating from the Chinese western borderlands. They were called Tangut by the Turks and Mongols (Atwood 2004:590–592).

On the first day of the year the people at the court wore white robes and exchanged white presents. Most extraordinary according to Polo was a great procession of decorated animals in front of the Great Khan.

He writes of hundred thousand beautiful white horses, 5000 elephants and following them, “a vast number of camels which were likewise covered with rich housings and laden with things needful for the feast” (Yule 1903:I.391). During the Yuan Dynasty camels were used in many ways: as beast of burden, dragging the huge Mongolian tents on carts, as food and for military purposes but mostly for transportation of supplies, and their hair was processed into the finest garments, according to Polo called *camlet* (Yule 1903). White camlets were most treasured as they were made from the wool of white camels, which were regarded as the best (Schafer 1950:191–192, Yule 1903).

The splendid art flourishing under the Mongolian Il-Khans⁷ in Iran, cousins of the khans in Yuan China, offers insights into the use of the camel and its depiction in art during the Great Mongolian Empire: book illustrations for the Great Mongol *Shahname*, the *Book of Kings* (the national epic that celebrates the ancient Iranian kings) and architectural elements with depictions of scenes of the *Shahname* show the camel as a riding animal also used for hunting.

NINE WHITES

For the Mongols, nine was and is a number of special importance: the shamanic (pre-Buddhist) heaven was believed to consist of nine layers and in the *Secret History* the number nine is reserved for the pivotal doings of Chinggis Khan (Berger 2003:48). The number nine was a fundamental organizing principle also later for the Qing – particularly in their gift giving.

During the Qing-Dynasty (1644–1911), from 1655 onwards, the Nine Whites were an annual ritualized tribute by the Khalkha khans from northern Mongolia for the Qing Emperor in China. The Nine Whites refer to nine white sacred animals: eight white horses and one white camel – flawlessly formed and perfectly white and drawn from herds all over Mongolia (Berger 2003:48).

The high lamas and Khans of Mongolia, like the last Bogd Khan, the Eighth Jibzundamba Khutugtu (1870–1924), were presented with personal gifts in exchange. Among the belongings of the Eighth Bogd Khan were items such as an ewer, today housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Ulaanbaatar.

Three of the Mongolian five animals are part of the design of this ewer, which itself is a combination of Tibetan and Mongolian styles: a cow is on the top of the lid, the heads of two rams decorate the overhead handle, while camels with open mouths form the spouts. A vertical wall divides the interior of the ewer into two parts, so that two separate beverages could be served (Bartholomew 1995:104).

The old Qing tributary system was still echoed after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. In the early 1920s a special white camel is described by the Polish writer and explorer Ferdinand Ossendowski: according to him, during Russian Civil War, the legendary, controversial Baltic Baron Ungern Sternberg⁸ offered Ossendowski, who travelled through Mongolia in 1920/21, his own white camel to ride to the capital town Urga. Ungern-Sternberg was then fighting against

⁷ The title Il-Khan, or “*obedient khan*” refers to the status as deputy or viceroy of the great khans of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (cf. Atwood 2004:230–232).

⁸ Robert Roman Fedorovich Baron von Ungern-Sternberg (1886–1921) was a commander of White troops who supported and won Mongolian independence from the Chinese in 1921. He was also known for acts of cruelty, for example against Bolsheviks and Jews. He was executed by Soviet authorities in 1921 (Atwood 2004:572–574).

the Bolsheviks and Red Army troops in Urga (today Ulaanbaatar) and expelled them violently from Urga. Ossendowski writes:

“I was awakened by Baron Ungern who came to ask pardon that he could not take me in his motor car. . . . But he informed me that he had left instructions to give me his own white camel and two Cossacks as servants. . . . My mount was the fastest of them all. He was a huge white animal with a splendid thick mane and had been presented to Baron Ungern by some Prince of Inner Mongolia with two black sables tied on the bridle. He was a calm, strong, bold giant of the desert, on whose back I felt myself as though perched on the tower of a building” (Ossendowski 1922: 226, 228).

MONGOLIAN BELIEF SYSTEMS AND PROTECTION FOR ANIMALS

Alongside the so-far discussed white camel, Mongolian belief systems were further cultural markers featured in the film about the weeping camel. These belief systems are characterized by the syncretism of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist beliefs⁹ and by the integration of animals into Mongolian life in general and into religious life in particular. Amulets were and are still used for the protection of animals, including camels, and there are prayers for the five animals. A paper printed amulet from the early 20th century, protecting the house, possessions and herds of five kinds of animals against dangers such as wolves, diseases, thieves and negative influences, is described by Kelény (2003:71–73). The five animals and associated mantras are depicted on this amulet. The mantra of the Buddhist protective goddess Shridevi appears above the camel; below the camel Tibetan text reads: “Protect camels from all deadly diseases! Protect their young from every evil spirit!” (Kelény 2003:71).

MUSIC FOR CAMELS

Music, including vocal sounds as whistling, overtone singing and various instruments, forms an integral part of life in Mongolian countryside and is an essential form of communication with animals.

The instrument that is played in the film to placate the mother camel is the horsehead fiddle, the *morin khuur*. Today this two-stringed instrument is the national instrument par excellence and represents an icon of Mongolian national identity (cf. Marsh 2009).

Music and sounds are used to influence and control animals. There are different remedies for each of the five animals that reject their newborn and the musical techniques depend on the geographical region. For camels it is mostly the fiddle or the singing of a special very sad song, for example about a camel mother punished for running away. It is said that when camel mothers hear this song they weep large tears and give milk (cf. Pegg 2001: 237–239).

And it is also the music, the sounds of the wind in the strings of a fiddle (m. *khuur*), hung from one hump of the camel that may soothe the camel.

The story of the film about the weeping camel is therefore based on old Mongolian practices, tales and myths. *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, however, was not the first film dealing with these aspects of Mongolian culture. A film with a similar plot was well known even during the communist period. But in this film no Buddhist rites are carried out by monks to placate the camel mother. On the one hand, featuring religion was not possible under the communist regime, on the other hand the integration of Buddhist rituals might fit more the imagination of the

⁹ Buddhism spread to Mongolia from India through early trade routes. During the Mongolian Empire, Khubilai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan, established close relations to Phags pa, an eminent Tibetan lama of the then important Sakyapa sect. He converted Khubilai to Tibetan Buddhism, Khubilai promoted him to imperial preceptor and Tibetan Buddhism was becoming influential within the Empire. The often so-called “Second Conversion,” which went much further, was implemented in the 16th century under Altan Khan of northern Khalkha. Buddhism became the official state religion by this time and lasted until the communist repressions in the late 1930s.

film makers and a national Mongolian identity construction after the fall of the communist regime in 1990.

In the 20th century, Mongolian music and musical remedies to heal the camel have increasingly become associated with the horsehead fiddle. Before the destruction of monastic life in Mongolia in the 1930s, various monastic instruments used by monks and Mongolian music in general was perhaps not that much associated with the horsehead fiddle, but with a range of fiddles and other instruments such as lutes, flutes, pipes, zithers and dulcimers.

At this point I want to draw the link to ethnographic data, to the practice collected more than hundred years ago concerning the taming of a mother camel. This may represent a historic source for a film and narratives about the story of the weeping camel.

DESCRIPTIONS BY THE TRAVELER HANS LEDER

In 1892 the Austrian scientific traveler Hans Leder reached Urga (today the capital, Ulaanbaatar) the capital of northern Mongolia and organized a caravan consisting of five camels, seven horses and two Mongolian monks as translators (Lang 2010). They headed off in western direction to Karakorum, which was once the centre of the Mongolian Empire. During this first journey to Mongolia, Leder experienced and noted many details of Mongolian lifestyles and nature. When he reached the area of Olon noor (many lakes) he came across many yurt gatherings (*mail*) and animal herds of the five animals including the Bactrian camel. Leder noted:

The camel is the two-humped Bactrian, that is used here as everywhere to carry loads, but is used to pull as well; but even the meat of old and ill animals occasionally killed in accidents is relished, though even the Mongols do not call it a delicacy. Yet the possession of camels is the indicator for wealth of the possessor, even more than other domestic animals (Leder 1894:422–424; translation M.-K. Lang).

Leder observed, as he put it, “a curious practice of music, or better just sounds on animals”:

In this special case it was a female camel, that had given birth shortly before and that, be it because it was its first time or even more likely, because it felt still too weak and miserable after a just endured hard winter and did absolutely not want to accept its newborn but refused the maternal nutrition. To placate the ignorant mother, she was tied, especially evenings in short distance to her likewise fixed calf by a rope. And now a Mongolian began to blow into a cow-horn with long drawn pitiable, but very loud sounds, always in one and the same way, so that it sounded wide and feeble over the steppe.

It took quite a while unless the mother animal seemed to take any visible notice; finally it listened more and more alert and started to be uneasy. The excitement increased visibly and the musician, on his part, used his best endeavors to take advantage of and increase this fortunate atmosphere with his most beautiful tooting.

The camel even started gurgling itself and to roar, whereby it tried to bring its voice in accordance with sounds of the horn and taking all efforts to break free at the same time. After its excitement had reached the highest grade, it was released, whereupon it hastily ran to its calf, caressing it and willingly offering its udder (Leder 1894:244–246; translation M.-K. Lang).

This account contrasts to many stories about camels and “weeping” camels, where a string instrument and the human voice are usually used to influence the mother camel. The cow horn, witnessed by Leder might have been used more frequently for example in central Mongolia.

Leder, who started his scientific career primarily as an entomologist, changed his collecting focus increasingly from insects to ethnographic objects, mainly Mongolian Buddhist art. Part of his collection is now housed in the Museum of Ethnology in the center of Vienna.¹⁰ There I

¹⁰ Research project (2010–2012) “Mongolian Ethnographica of the Austrian Collector Hans Leder at Museums across Europe”, forMUSE – research at museums: a program funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research (www.forMUSE.at). Probably the most extensive collection(s) of Mongolian ethnographica in Europe goes back to the Austrian explorer Hans Leder (1848–1921). The collection is unique as it represents a snapshot of religious everyday culture in northern Mongolia at the turn of the 19th century. This part of Mongolian

recovered a small thangka (Buddhist scroll painting) among other items in the museum depository that is of relevance for the subject of this article.

THE WINTER GODDESS

The thangka of the Winter Goddess (inventory number 74.984; see picture 22) was collected by Hans Leder in 1905 during his last stay in Urga. Unfortunately, it is extremely darkened as for some time it was part of an altar place and hung above butter lamps. It was collected as “used object”, taken from daily life, so that – according to Leder – it still had a special “authentic” aura.

This depiction shows the Winter Goddess or Queen of Winter riding on a camel. This wrathful deity is one of the four goddesses associated with the four seasons who usually accompany Shridevi (m. *okin tenger*, *lam burkhan* tib. *Lhamo*), the only feminine divinity among the Protectors of the Law of Buddhism (tib. *dharmapala*), a group of fierce deities who usually became protectors of Buddhism after having been converted to the faith. Her body is blue/black and she is holding her attributes, a human skull cup filled with blood (skr. *kapala*) and a mace (skr. *gada*), and riding a camel. Usually, the Winter Goddess is depicted on thangkas as part of the ensemble of Shridevi and her retinue. In this thangka she is shown on her own, possibly owing to a special veneration of this goddess in some areas of Mongolia.

CONCLUSIONS

Film as a documentary source offers additional access to specific cultural constellations and imaginations. Artifacts and museum collections are also conveyors of knowledge and provide a link between the historic past, narrations, legends and lived practices. Combined with descriptions in various accounts, depictions and images of the camel may thereby contribute to a better understanding of the significance of the camel in Mongolia. As illustrated in this article, a popular film such as *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, taken as a starting point to reflect on the camel in Mongolian culture, can be read and connected to (the memory of) the historic past in various ways – thus it widens the view on the interactions and interrelations of humans and camels.

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culture was increasingly repressed and mostly destroyed in the late 1930s. In the course of this project, the various parts of the collection are recorded, analysed in detail, catalogued by object groups and combined in one comprehensive viewing. Field studies in the course of the project intend to contrast the locations and monasteries described by the collector and to conduct interviews regarding the history of sacred objects and locations.

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